

Michigan Adoption Day Press Conference
Tuesday, November 23, 2004, 8 am
Oakland County Courthouse
Remarks of Chief Justice Maura D. Corrigan

Thank you, Judge Alexander, for that kind introduction. With me is Randy Wilger, the program manager for Children's Community Support Network, about which you'll hear more in a moment.

I'd like to begin this Michigan Adoption Day with a question: do you believe in miracles? Because I believe this court and others across Michigan are going to witness many miracles today.

I used to think a miracle was something imposed from the outside that changed the course of nature, something that human beings could only watch and marvel at, but not participate in. But as I grew older – and actually had the privilege of witnessing certain events and indeed people who seem to be miraculous to me, I've come to think differently. I now believe that miracles only happen with human participation. That the only way a miracle finds its way into this world is if a human being says, "Yes." The miraculous waits on our consent.

What kind of miracle will take place here today? A child will enter a family. That is a miracle no matter how it happens. But it takes human beings to say, "Yes." It takes an adult to say, "Yes, I want you in my life, I want you to be my child, yes I will care for you and love you."

And there is another "yes," without which no adoption can take place. All judges today, finalizing adoptions, will ask a number of questions, but there is one they all must and will ask, and that is, "Do you want to be adopted today?" And so there is another "yes," the child's "yes, I want to be your child and be part of your family" that makes the miracle complete. How wonderful, this consent that allows the miraculous to take place.

Adoptions are miraculous in another sense: they make people actually happy to come to court! I have never seen more smiles in court than I did on our first Michigan Adoption Day last year, when our courts finalized over 250 adoptions. This year we will have even more smiles – 339 adoptions will be finalized!

This is a wonderful day, and I feel privileged to share it with the children and their families. The court, the Family Independence Agency, the private agencies, the families – everyone involved – all deserve kudos. All the Justices extend their best wishes.

I'm pleased to be able to make two announcements. One is that this court is finalizing more adoptions – 37 – than any other court in the state today!

The other is that Michigan once again leads the country in the great participation we have among our counties. As you know, November is National Adoption Month, and a number of states hold their own Adoption Day events. Last year, the organizers of National Adoption Day told us that Michigan, with 34 counties, had the most locations participating in Adoption Day. And that is true again this year: for Michigan Adoption Day 2004, 42 of our 83 counties in Michigan are involved in some way in Michigan Adoption Day. Now, not all of those courts are making their adoption hearings open to the public. In fact, it's a rare thing for an adoption hearing to be public – they are usually

closed hearings that only the judge, court employees, and family can attend, which is perhaps one reason why the adoption process is not better understood by the public. So it is just tremendous that so many families did consent to allowing the press and public in.

In addition, not all counties had adoptions to finalize, but they are holding events to help educate the public about the adoption process and all the thousands of foster children we have in Michigan who want and need permanent, loving homes. I'm told that our nearest competition is New York, which had 30-some participating locations. So Michigan has bragging rights for another year!

But the point of this event, of course, is not to see who can rack up the highest numbers of adoptions or organize the biggest event. Our true measure of success is how well we educate the public about the plight of foster children in our state. Last week, my court issued a resolution declaring today to be Michigan Adoption Day. As we said in that resolution, "the goal is to draw attention to the needs of these children and youth, particularly their need for the love and stability offered by a permanent family." This event is, first and foremost, about helping the children. Last year, we worked hard to explode the myth that there are no children available for adoption in Michigan. At any given time, 19,000 children and youth are in foster care in Michigan. The vast majority of these young people are victims of abuse and neglect. Some return to their biological parents or are placed with relatives; others are adopted. But the majority of foster children are not adopted or returned to their biological families. Indeed, after age 11, a child's chances of being adopted are very slim. As a result, many foster children simply remain in care until they literally "age out" of foster care, usually by age 19. These young people enter adult life without an adult support structure and without important life skills.

Randy is going to talk to you about the bleak future that, statistics tell us, face most of these former foster youth. But all of us who have raised children to young adulthood know that turning 18 or 19 does not magically transform teenagers into totally self-sufficient adults who can find and keep a job, locate housing, budget and save money, and raise children of their own. And our judges can tell you that these foster youth will be back in court – over 50 percent of them within two years of leaving foster care.

There is one other area where I'm hoping for a miracle and hoping people will make it happen! Those of us in the justice system understandably and rightly concentrate on getting children into permanent placements. But we must also realize that many children and youth are just never going to be adopted. We cannot simply throw up our hands in response; we must ask ourselves what we can do for these foster children.

From my visits with various community groups around the state, I have become convinced that there are many people of good will who – although they are not prepared to adopt – want to help foster children and youth, but don't know how or where to go to volunteer. The needs of foster youth are profound and varied – but how to connect them and this great wellspring of private good will?

That is the mission of the Children's Community Support Network. One of the great privileges I've enjoyed as Chief Justice is the opportunity to work with miraculous people, and Randy Wilger is certainly one of them. I met Randy for the first time in 2001 after he asked me to meet with the directors of the Foster Care Review Board, of which he was then chairman. It was clear to me that Randy brought a great deal of knowledge, energy, and passion to his work as an advocate for foster children. When Randy stepped

down from the Foster Care Review Board, I told him that I wasn't done with him yet – and he was kind enough to come out of retirement to lead the charge with CCSN. I'm going to turn the podium over to Randy now so that he can share the details of this program.